

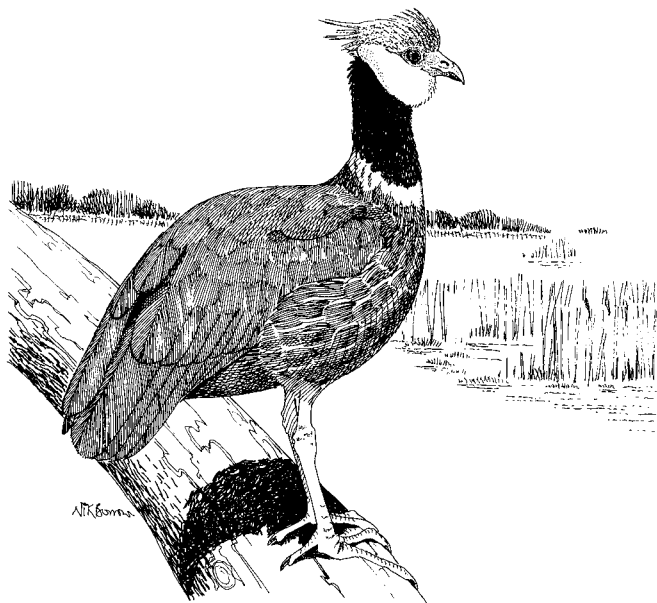
WESTERN VENEZUELA

Saturday 4th February – Saturday 18th February 2012 (15 days)
Santo Domingo Andes & Llanos Post-Tour Extension to Friday 24th February (6 days)

Leader: Eustace Barnes

Group Size Limit: 9

Tour Category: Easy to Moderate



Northern Screamer (Nik Borrow)

Whether this is your first tour to South America, or whether you are a veteran of Latin American journeys, Western Venezuela offers a compelling experience. The region's extraordinarily rich avifauna includes such diverse groups as tinamous, screamers, sunbitterns, hoatzins, parrots, hummingbirds, quetzals, jacamars, puffbirds, toucans, woodcreepers, ovenbirds, antbirds, tapaculos, cotingas, manakins, orioles and tanagers.

Western Venezuela is undoubtedly one of the classic regions to visit in 'The Bird Continent', as South America is known, for this part of the country has many species which are either endemic or only shared with rather inaccessible neighbouring regions of Colombia, as well as a large number of species

of broader distribution in the Neotropics. Our tour is designed to be the most comprehensive birding tour of Western Venezuela available, producing more specialities than any other.

Such captivating names as Boat-billed Heron, Northern Screamer, Yellow-knobbed Curassow, Sunbittern, Orange-throated Sunangel, Long-tailed Sylph, Red-billed Scythebill and Pearled Treerunner conjure up images which are not disappointed by the reality. Equally, with its many exciting endemic and near-endemic birds, Western Venezuela is a key area to visit for a Neotropical enthusiast, no matter how well-travelled. The vast tropical forests, the huge river systems dominated by the mighty Orinoco, the endless savanna wetlands of the Llanos and the high

mountains that form the northernmost ranges of the Andes all add to Venezuela's remarkable diversity. Venezuela's comparatively well-developed road system, a superb field guide and a general lack of tourists make exploration here a pleasure and enable us to unlock the country's avian treasure chest.

We start our journey in the Cordillera de la Costa Central, a mountain chain on Venezuela's Caribbean coast. Here amongst the varied forest types near Colonia Tovar and in the superb Henri Pittier National Park we will first appreciate the pleasures of Venezuelan birding. Birdlife here is rich and diverse, including a considerable number of endemics ranging from such spectacular birds as White-tipped Quetzal and Handsome Fruiteater to the more unassuming Blood-eared Parakeet, Groove-billed Toucanet and Caracas Tapaculo.

From here we will travel into the arid zone of northwestern Venezuela, home to some very special birds including American Flamingo and such endemics and near-endemics as Plain-flanked Rail, Bare-eyed Pigeon, Yellow-shouldered Parrot, Buffy Hummingbird, Slender-billed Inezia, Maracaibo Tody-Flycatcher and Vermilion Cardinal.

Reaching the northern

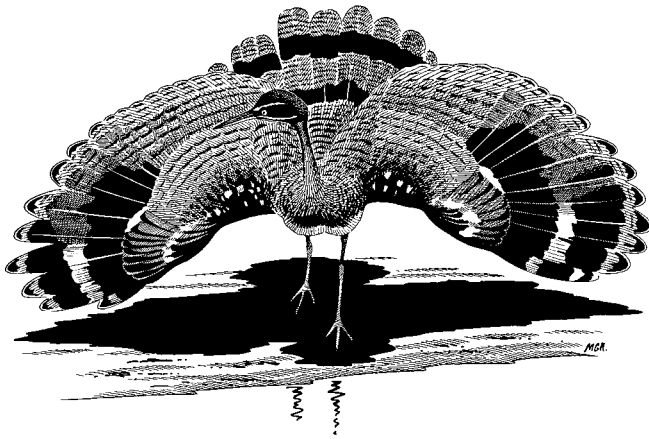
base of the Andes, we shall visit Yacambú National Park, where a peaceful pond holds Caribbean Coot and the endemic Rusty-flanked Crane, while surrounding montane forests will offer a first introduction to the rich Andean avifauna.

Next we will make our way to the huge Lake Maracaibo, home to the stately Northern Screamer, and in the surrounding verdant lowlands and foothills we shall seek out such specialities as Saffron-headed Parrot, Pygmy Palm-Swift, Citron-throated Toucan and Grey-throated Warbler before climbing higher into the Venezuelan Andes.

Bird speciation has occurred more rapidly in the Andes than anywhere else on earth as the progressive uplift of these magnificent mountains has isolated one tract of forest from another. During our stay here we will explore a wide variety of montane forest habitats ranging from the humid cloudforests along the Azulita road and the bamboo-choked temperate forest and shrubbery of northern Tachira to the magnificent primary forest north of Mérida

During our Andean exploits we will encounter a marvellous selection of species including many interesting endemics and other specialities, and we





Sunbittern (Michael Hodgson)

hope to find the captivating Rose-crowned Parakeet, the gorgeous Longuemare's Sunangel, the elusive Grey-naped and Slate-crowned Antpittas, Mérida Tapaculo, White-fronted Whitestart, Mérida Flowerpiercer and Grey-capped Hemispingus, and if we are fortunate the rare Slaty-backed Hemispingus, as well as many other exciting birds.

During the optional extension we will first explore the alpine paramo zone of the Andes with its dramatic scenery and attendant bird specialities and then the rich east slope habitats below Santo Domingo. Here we will be looking for such stars as Ochre-browed Thistle-tail, Mérida Wren and the beautiful but sometimes elusive Bearded Helmetcrest, as well as lekking Andean Cocks-of-the-Rock and many other superb birds.

From the Andes, in striking contrast, we descend into the Llanos, a wetland area of international importance teeming with waterbirds of many kinds and a superb collection of raptors. An enlightened policy of conservation in conjunction with cattle ranching at Hato El Cedral, a remote ranch that encourages visitors, gives us access to the finest area in these bird-rich savannas. This

extraordinary place will be a fitting climax to a marvellous adventure as we admire huge Jabirus and no fewer than seven species of ibis (including the incomparable Scarlet), explore jungle creeks in search of secretive Zigzag and Agami Herons, near-endemic Yellow-knobbed Curassows and extraordinary Sunbitterns and Hoatzins, and search the grassland and riverine woodland for specialities such as Dwarf Cuckoo, Amazonian Black-Tyrant, Riverside Tyrant and White-bearded Flycatcher, all while enjoying the sights of thousands of waterbirds, lazing capybaras and quietly lurking caiman.

Birdquest has operated tours to Venezuela since 1988.

Itinerary

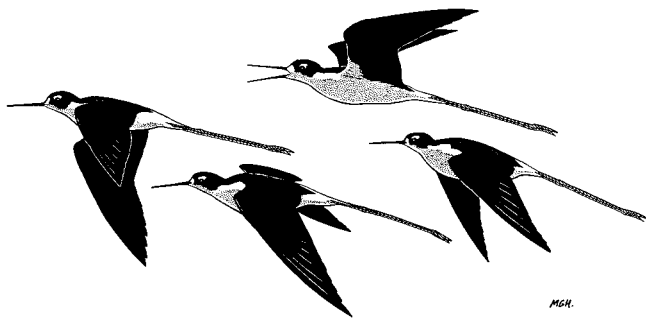
Day 1 The tour begins in the late afternoon at Caracas airport. We will stay overnight nearby.

Day 2 This morning we will head high up into the coastal range and explore the subtropical forests in the vicinity of Colonia Tovar, a picturesque and decidedly un-Venezuelan-looking village founded long ago by German immigrants. The specialities of this area are two localized endemics,

Black-throated Spinetail and Caracas Tapaculo, both of which commonly vocalize from dense bamboo thickets, and we may well also encounter some other restricted-range species such as Fulvous-headed Tanager and Ochre-breasted Brush-Finch. We will also watch out for the diminutive and often hard-to-find Rufous-shafted Woodstar, only found in Venezuela and some remote parts of Colombia. Other more widespread species that we are likely to encounter include Black Hawk-Eagle, Speckled Hummingbird, Montane Woodcreeper, White-throated Tyrannulet, Mountain Elaenia, Brown-capped Vireo, Blue-and-white Swallow, Glossy-black and Black-hooded Thrushes, Blackburnian and Black-crested Warblers, American Redstart, Slate-throated Whitestart, Blue-capped, Beryl-spangled, Black-headed and Speckled Tanagers, Common Bush-Tanager, Bluish and White-sided Flowerpiercers, Rufous-collared Sparrow and Yellow-bellied Seedeater. In the late afternoon we will continue to Maracay for a three nights stay. Typical roadside species along the way will include Black and Turkey Vultures, Tropical Kingbird, Blue-black Grassquit and Carib Grackle.

Days 3-4 As the dawn mists weave through giant tree ferns, the haunting roar of the Red Howler Monkey greets our arrival in Henri Pittier National Park. Over 500 species of birds have been recorded within this remarkable 250,000-acre (100,000-hectare) park, which lies between the city of Maracay and the Caribbean coast. Straddling the Cordillera de la Costa Central, a wide range of forest types occur within the park boundary. Inland from the dry coastal fringe the northern slopes are clad in wet tropical evergreen forest, turning to cloudforest around the summits, whilst dry deciduous woodland occupies the southern flanks. It is this

floristic variety which results in such a diverse avifauna. Two roads bisect the park, allowing access to many of the major habitats, though a large portion of our time will be spent at the Rancho Grande Biological Station, located at the Porculla Pass and the site of decades of mistnetting and migration studies. As the sun penetrates the forest canopy, flocks of multi-coloured parakeets and tanagers begin their feeding rounds and the aptly-named foliage-gleaners peruse the epiphytes which clothe many of the trees. Iridescent hummingbirds, with such evocative names as White-vented Plumeteer, Violet-fronted Brilliant and Long-tailed Sylph, flit from flower to flower too fast for the eye to follow. Fruiting trees lure in such gaudy gems as Collared Trogon and White-tipped Quetzal, and fruit laid out on a bird table attracts endemic Groove-billed Toucanets, hungry Red-crowned Woodpeckers and Buff-throated Saltators, bold Rusty-backed Oropendolas, Green Honeycreepers and White-lined, Silver-beaked, Blue-grey, Palm, Golden and Bay-headed Tanagers. Noisy White-tipped Swifts nest in the station building (the retreat of one of Venezuela's old-time dictators), garrulous flocks of the endemic Blood-eared Parakeet speed through the canopy and high overhead we may see tiny Lilac-tailed Parrotlets commuting between feeding areas. Inside the forest, Grey-throated Leaf-tossers, Black-faced Anthruses and Plain-backed Antpittas search the leaf litter for tasty bits of protein, and with perseverance we should see all three of these shy terrestrial birds. Mixed flocks of insectivorous understory species typically contain Plain Antvireo, Slaty Antwren, Slaty-capped Flycatcher and Three-striped Warbler, but we will diligently sort through them in search of two inconspicuous endemics, Guttulated Foliage-Gleaner and Venezuelan Antvireo. Loud wailing calls



Black-necked Stilts (Michael Hodgson)

may betray the presence of the reclusive Venezuelan Wood-Quail, although we will count ourselves extremely fortunate if we end up seeing this well-camouflaged and secretive endemic. Canopy flocks make their round too, and amidst the flurry of activity we will try to pin down, among others, Crested Spinetail, Montane and Buff-fronted Foliage-gleaners, the endemic Rufous-lore Tyrannulet (formerly known as Yellow-bellied Bristle-Tyrant), Marble-faced Bristle-Tyrant, the endemic Venezuelan Bristle-Tyrant, Yellow-olive Flatbill, Black-and-white and Chestnut-crowned Becards, Golden-fronted Greenlet, Cerulean and Black-and-white Warblers, Tropical Parula and Orange-bellied Euphonia. Among the many other species we may see at Rancho Grande, elsewhere in the park or in the more open habitats on its periphery are Short-tailed Hawk, the strangely-shaped but beautiful White Hawk, Band-tailed Pigeon, White-tipped Dove, Scarlet-fronted Parakeet, Blue-headed and Red-billed Parrots, Squirrel Cuckoo, White-collared and Vaux's Swifts, Pale-bellied, Sooty-capped and Stripe-throated Hermits, White-necked Jacobin, Black-throated Mango, Blue-tailed Emerald, Copper-rumped Hummingbird, Bronzy Inca, the stolid Two-banded Puffbird, Moustached Puffbird,

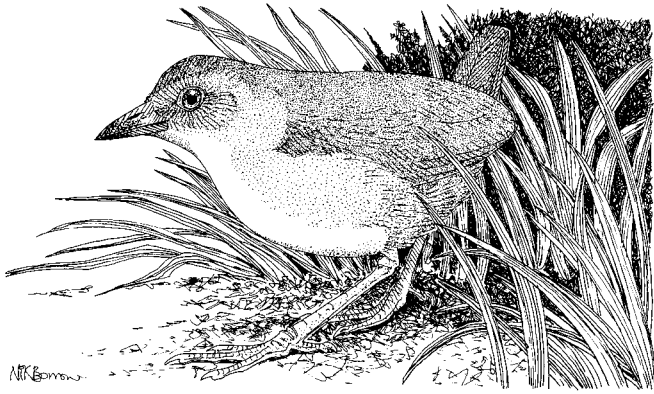
Scaled Piculet, Golden-olive, Lineated and Smoky-brown Woodpeckers, Plain Xenops, Plain-brown, Olivaceous, Strong-billed, Black-banded and Cocoa Woodcreepers, the extraordinary Red-billed Scythebill, the shy Schwartz's (or Scalloped) Antthrush, Smoke-coloured Pewee, Olive-striped, Cinnamon, Dusky-capped, Boat-billed, Social and Golden-crowned Flycatchers, Great Kiskadee, Masked Tityra, the restricted-range Golden-breasted Fruiteater, the endemic Handsome Fruiteater, the gaudy Lance-tailed Manakin, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Red-eyed Vireo, Inca Jay (split from Green), Southern Rough-winged Swallow, Whiskered, Rufous-breasted, Buff-breasted, Rufous-and-white and House Wrens, Grey-breasted Wood-Wren, Southern Nightingale-Wren, Andean Solitaire, Pale-breasted and White-necked Thrushes, Bananaquit, the endemic Rufous-cheeked Tanager, White-winged and Fawn-breasted Tanagers, Blue-winged Mountain-Tanager, Thick-billed Euphonia, Blue-naped Chlorophonia, Swallow-Tanager, Yellow-rumped Cacique and Crested Oropendola. A pre-dawn owling session could turn up Foothill Screech-Owl. We should also see one or two of the more uncommon birds of the area, which include Fasciated Tiger-Heron,

Solitary Eagle, Violet-chested Hummingbird and the endearing Scallop-breasted Antpitta.

Day 5 After some final birding in Henri Pittier we will drive northwestwards to the town of Tucucas for an overnight stay. En route we shall visit a narrow strip of mangroves where we have an excellent chance of encountering the rare and little-known endemic Plain-flanked Rail, as well as the smart Golden Warbler and the inquisitive Bicoloured Conebill. Overhead, Magnificent Frigatebirds survey the scene, while other birds we may find here include Brown Pelican, Eared Dove, Ringed Kingfisher, Straight-billed Woodcreeper, Brown-crested Flycatcher, White-winged Swallow, Grey-breasted Martin and Northern Waterthrush. Close to Chichiriviche, the 'scopes will be red hot as we investigate the throngs of waterbirds lining the lagoons along the causeway which bisects Morrocoy National Park. The most symbolic species of the area are the blood red Scarlet Ibis and the graceful American Flamingo, but we should also come across a wide range of other birds such as Neotropic Cormorant, Blue-winged Teal, Tricoloured and Striated Herons, Great, Snowy, Reddish and Western Cattle Egrets, Northern Crested and Yellow-headed Caracaras, American Kestrel, Southern Lapwing, Black-necked Stilt, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Spotted and Least Sandpipers, Laughing Gull, Striped Cuckoo, Tropical Mockingbird, Eastern Meadowlark and Red-breasted Blackbird. Late in the afternoon, streams of Orange-winged Parrots drift overhead towards their nocturnal hide-outs in the nearby mangroves.

Day 6 This morning we will visit the attractive, park-like landscape at the base of Cerro La Misión, a nearby forested limestone outcrop. As the early morning sunshine

illuminates the scene, raucous Red-and-green Macaws squawk their way past us as they commute from their roosts to their feeding grounds. The smaller Chestnut-fronted Macaw can be found here as well, but our prime target will be the noisy Caribbean Hornero, which often struts along the side of the dirt track in search of breakfast. Among a wide variety of other birds we may find in this area are Harris's and Grey Hawks, Scaled Dove, Ruddy Ground-Dove, Yellow-crowned Parrot, Smooth-billed and Groove-billed Anis, Plain Thornbird (whose vast stick nests are often more conspicuous than the bird itself), Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Sooty-headed Tyrannulet, Forest and Yellow-bellied Elaenias, Common Tody-Flycatcher, Ochre-lore Flatbill (formerly Yellow-breasted Flycatcher), Tropical Pewee, Cattle Tyrant, the lovely Vermilion Flycatcher, Cinereous Becard, Black-crowned Tityra, Saffron Finch and Oriole Blackbird. With a modicum of luck we will even encounter the impressive Horned Screamer, and we shall also visit a nearby woodland patch in the hopes of finding the near-endemic Venezuelan Flycatcher. Driving further west we enter increasingly arid habitats, a stop in which may produce Southern Beardless and Mouse-coloured Tyrannulets, Northern Scrub-Flycatcher, the inconspicuous Tawny-crowned Pygmy-Tyrant, Scrub Greenlet, Tropical Gnatcatcher and Glaucous Tanager. Next, we shall climb into some coastal hills where tangled woodland provides shelter to such interesting birds as the near-endemic Black-backed Antshrike, the smart Northern White-fringed Antwren, the vociferous White-bellied Antbird, Yellow Warbler and Black-striped Sparrow. By late afternoon we will reach Coro for an overnight stay, and in the surrounding cactus-studded landscape we will be hoping to witness the evening roosting flight of the small and



Rusty-flanked Crake (Nik Borrow)

endangered Yellow-shouldered Parrot (which is only found very locally in northern Venezuela and on the island of Bonaire).

Day 7 Coro is situated in the heart of the semi-arid zone that includes most of northwestern Venezuela. The city was founded as early as 1527 and still has many beautiful old colonial buildings. This dry region is characterized by scrubby xerophytic vegetation and in places the scenery becomes decidedly desert-like. This morning we will be searching the dry habitats in the Coro region for a number of special birds that are either endemic to northern Venezuela or else shared only with northeastern Colombia. These include Buffy Hummingbird, Russet-throated Puffbird, the unusually colourful White-whiskered Spinetail, 'Maracaibo Antshrike' (a distinctive form of the Black-crested Antshrike, and a good candidate for a split), Slender-billed Inezia, Maracaibo Tody-Flycatcher and Vermilion Cardinal. We may also encounter Bare-eyed Pigeon, Bicoloured Wren, Trinidad Euphonia, the smart Orinocan Saltator, Black-faced Grassquit and the near-endemic Venezuelan Troupial (Venezuela's national bird), all species of not much wider distribution, as well as the

more widespread Common Ground-Dove, Brown-throated Parakeet, Green-rumped Parrotlet, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Greyish Saltator, Grey Pileated-Finch and Yellow Oriole. Later we will head south towards Barquisimeto, and during several short stops we will investigate some patches of woodland and nearby farmland where we may find Golden-tailed Sapphire, the striking Bicoloured Wren, Long-billed Gnatwren, Golden-crowned Warbler and Streaked Saltator. From Barquisimeto we will climb into the northernmost outliers of the Andes for a two nights stay in a cozy posada near the little town of Sanare.

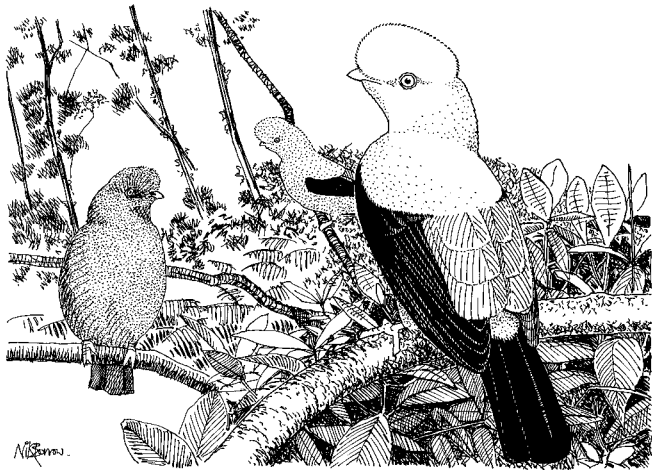
Day 8 The verdant forests of beautiful Yacambú National Park are home to many of the birds we will already have seen in the coastal cordillera, in addition to a number of typical Andean birds which here are found near the northeastern limit of their distribution. In the bromeliad-laden subtropical forests, Band-tailed Guans and Andean Toucanets (split from Emerald) gorge themselves on fruiting trees, mixed canopy flocks include such multi-hued gems as Saffron-crowned and Black-capped Tanagers, and in the understory we will hear the vibrant trills

of the Mérida Tapaculo, an ultra-secretive and mouse-like denizen of the forest floor (but we should eventually get everybody to see this vocal little bird). Other species we may find here include White-rumped and Broad-winged Hawks, Ruddy Pigeon, the flashy Masked Trogon and the branch-hugging Pearled Treerunner, and if we are extremely fortunate we will even come across the endangered Northern Helmeted Curassow, males of which utter their deep booming sounds from deep in the woods during the months of February and March. Later in the morning we shall descend to lower elevations where the forest-fringed lagoon of El Blanquito holds Least Grebe and Caribbean Coot. From the lake's fringes we will hear the churring calls of the endemic Rusty-flanked Crake and we shall make a persistent effort to see this secretive skulker. Other birds found along the lake edge include Lesser Kiskadee and Rusty-margined Flycatcher, and in nearby woodland we will look for Stripe-breasted Spinetail, Long-tailed Antbird and the ghost-like Rusty-breasted Antpitta.

Day 9 Early this morning we will search the dry scrub below Sanare. This is one of the most accessible spots for finding the localized and near-endemic Tucuyo Sparrow, while another special bird inhabiting the tangled growth is the beautiful but very shy Rosy Thrush-Tanager. Barred Antshrike, Pearly-vented Tody-Tyrant and Burnished-buff Tanager are quite common here and we shall scan the treetops for the raucous Rufous-vented Chachalaca and check roadside flowers for the endemic Green-tailed Emerald. Subsequently we will head for La Azulita in the Andean foothills, not far from Lake Maracaibo, where we will stay for two nights at a pleasant lodge with very 'birdy' gardens. As we drive along the western base of the

Mérida Andes we will keep a diligent eye out for the tiny Pygmy Palm-Swift, endemic to the huge Maracaibo basin, and in the afternoon we will visit a river valley where cacao and coffee plantations still hold large trees that act as a magnet to a variety of birdlife. We will watch these trees and the nearby forests slopes for two large frugivores, the yelping Black-mandibled Toucan and the croaking and near-endemic Citron-throated Toucan. We shall also listen for the arresting calls of the mind-boggling Black-chested Jay, while other birds we may encounter here include Roadside Hawk, Bat Falcon, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Grey-rumped Swift, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Golden-faced Tyrannulet, Black-headed Tody-Flycatcher, Bran-coloured, Streaked and Piratic Flycatchers, Cinnamon Becard, Bare-eyed and Black-billed Thrushes, White-eared Conebill, Crimson-backed Tanager, Shiny Cowbird and Yellow-backed Oriole. If we are extremely fortunate a swift-flying flock of the rare, multi-hued Saffron-headed Parrot will hurtle by or land in a fruiting tree.

Day 10 We shall concentrate our efforts today on several tracts of forest on the road that winds up the western slope of the Mérida Andes above La Azulita. Remnant woodland patches at lower elevations hold the hard-to-come-by Grey-throated Warbler, otherwise only found in adjacent Colombia, in addition to more widespread birds such as Black Phoebe, Golden-winged Manakin, Mourning Warbler, Yellow-legged and Chestnut-bellied Thrushes, Summer, Blue-necked and Magpie Tanagers, Golden-rumped Euphonia and Lesser Goldfinch. Higher up the road, patches of humid cloudforest have other interesting species in store, and here we hope to find Hook-billed Kite, the endemic Rose-crowned Parakeet, Wedge-billed Hummingbird,



Andean Cocks-of-the-Rock (Nik Borrow)

Booted Racket-tail, Azara's Spinetail, Venezuelan Tyrannulet, Variegated Bristle-Tyrant and Blue-and-black Tanager. The hummingbird feeders at our lodge are visited by such gems as Orange-throated Sunangel, Buff-tailed Coronet and Collared Inca, while Lined Quail-Doves often forage between the ornamental bushes.

Day 11 This morning we will drive out to the edge of Lake Maracaibo, a huge brackish lagoon connected to the sea by a narrow opening, and then travel by boat to a large wetland reserve on its periphery. The boat ride deep into the Ciénagas de Catatumbo National Park will certainly be one of the highlights of the tour. Our target species here will be the near-endemic Northern Screamer. In the early morning these strange and shy birds are likely to be seen standing on the tops of bushes or low trees amongst the marshes. We will also see a fine selection of other waterbirds and swamp forest species such as Anhinga, Cocoi, Little Blue and Capped Herons, Bare-faced Ibis, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, Osprey, Slender-billed Kite, Black-collared Hawk, Common Black-Hawk, Purple Gallinule, Wattled Jacana, Large-billed Tern, Pale-vented Pigeon, Short-tailed Swift,

Shining-green Hummingbird, Collared Aracari, Amazon and Green Kingfishers, Yellow-chinned Spinetail, Pied Water-Tyrant, the striking White-headed Marsh-Tyrant, Black-capped Donacobius, the glowing Prothonotary Warbler and Yellow-hooded Blackbird. In the afternoon we will drive up into the Andes to the Zumbador area for a two nights stay.

Day 12 High above Zumbador a narrow road winds through amazingly well-preserved patches of high temperate and bamboo-laden Andean forest, in an area known as Paramos La Negra y Batallon. One of our goals in coming to the northern part of the state of Táchira is to track down the elusive and endemic Slaty-backed Hemispingus. While we will certainly need some good fortune to come across this very attractive but very uncommon bird, there are plenty of other exciting species to be found in the area. Swirling mixed flocks regularly make their round, and typical constituents include two endemics, the smart White-fronted Whitestart and the restless Grey-capped Hemispingus, in addition to White-banded Tyrannulet, the lovely Barred Fruiteater, Blue-backed Conebill, Superciliaried Hemispingus and Lacrimose Mountain-Tanager. Dense stands of

Chusquea bamboo hold the stunning Ocellated Tapaculo, and we shall try patiently to see this vociferous but extremely retiring species. The more modestly-clad White-browed Spinetail skulks in the same microhabitat, while near stream crossings we will watch for the endemic Blackish Chat-Tyrant. Showy flowers attract Tyrian Metaltail, the lovely Orange-throated Sunangel and the endemic Golden-tailed Starfrontlet, while dense shrubbery holds Moustached and Slaty Brush-Finches. Other birds we may find in the area include Andean Guan, Sparkling Violetear, Rufous Spinetail, Streak-throated Bush-Tyrant, Great Thrush, the secretive Buff-breasted Mountain-Tanager, and Masked and Glossy Flowerpiercers.

Day 13 After a final morning in the Zumbador area we will drive to Mérida for a two nights stay.

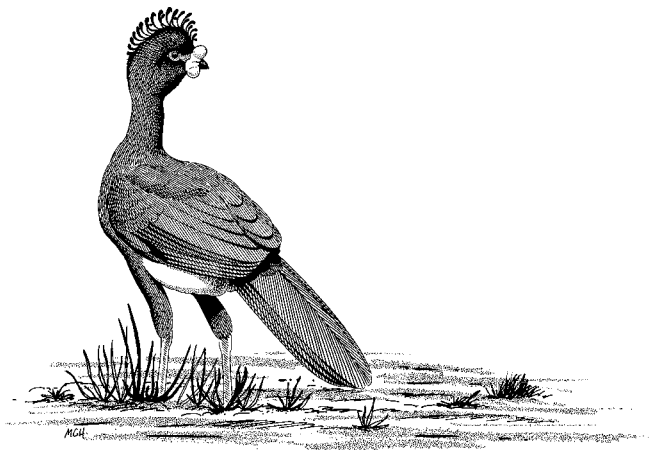
Days 14 Mérida is perched high in the Venezuelan Andes, which here rise to around 16,400ft (5000m) and provide a spectacular backdrop of mountain scenery to our birding over the next few days. We shall concentrate our efforts on a marvellous area within easy reach of the city, the pristine temperate forests on the lower flanks of Pico Humboldt in the Sierra Nevada National Park. Amongst the many interesting species we may encounter in this exciting area are White-capped Parrot, Longuemare's Sunangel, the magnificent Golden-headed Quetzal, Streaked Tuftedcheek, Green-and-black Fruiteater, Barred Becard, Yellow-bellied Chat-Tyrant, Black-capped Tyrannulet (here of a distinctive brown-capped race), Black-collared Jay, the fidgety Mountain Wren, Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush, Russet-crowned Warbler and Oleaginous Hemispingus. Amongst the more secretive denizens of these mountain forests are the common

Chestnut-crowned Antpitta (whose piercing three-note whistle will soon be a familiar sound), the endemic and more elusive Grey-naped Antpitta and the diminutive Slate-crowned Antpitta, and no doubt a significant part of our time will be spent trying to see these secretive forest floor dwellers. Lined Quail-Doves sometimes strut along the trail, so we will have another chance here for this attractive bird. More uncommon species include Chestnut-breasted Chlorophonia and Plushcap, while in the more open, cut-over habitats outside the national park we may find Chestnut-collared Swift and, if we are very fortunate, the near-endemic Short-tailed Emerald.

Day 15 After some final birding along the Pico Humboldt trail, you will be transferred to Mérida airport for an afternoon flight to Caracas, where the tour ends.

Santo Domingo Andes & Llanos Post-Tour Extension Itinerary

Day 15 After leaving the Mérida area we will head northeast along the Trans-Andean highway which reaches its highest point near Pico Aguila in the Paramo de Mucuchíes. Here at the impressive altitude of 4000m, providing it is clear, we shall enjoy outstanding views of the glacier-crowned Pico Bolívar and the backbone of the Venezuelan Andes in the distance, the jagged rock face of Pico Aguila itself and, far below, most of the upper Santo Domingo valley. The stunted growth of the alpine paramo is dominated by luxuriant patches of *Espeletia* or 'frailejon', an important component of the habitat of the beautiful but often elusive Bearded Helmetcrest – found only here and in adjacent Colombia. The helmetcrests largely move out of the area (and into inaccessible habitats) outside the rainy season, when the frailejones



Yellow-knobbed Curassow (Michael Hodgson)

are not in flower (i.e. the time of our visit), but we shall check out an area where we are in with a chance of finding one of these unusual birds. More reliable species we shall search for include Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, Bar-winged Cinclodes, the endemic Ochre-browed Thistletail, Streak-backed Canastero, Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant, Brown-bellied Swallow, the endemic Mérida (or Paramo) Wren, Paramo Pipit, Plumbeous Sierra-Finch and the sometimes elusive Andean Siskin. Later we shall descend to the Santo Domingo area for a three nights stay, stopping at the sparkling Laguna Mucubají to look for Andean Teal.

Days 16-17 During these two days we will explore the Santo Domingo valley (which drains towards the llanos along the east slope of the Mérida Andes), or even return to the high paramo if we need to. In the upper part of the valley are some fine areas of subtropical forest. Here a rich green tapestry of foliage is broken only by a magnificent red or yellow crown where a tree has burst into flower. These are always worth a second look as the flowering trees attract hummingbirds, whilst fruiting trees attract mixed flocks of tyrant-flycatchers, thrushes and tanagers. Along the rapidly tumbling river

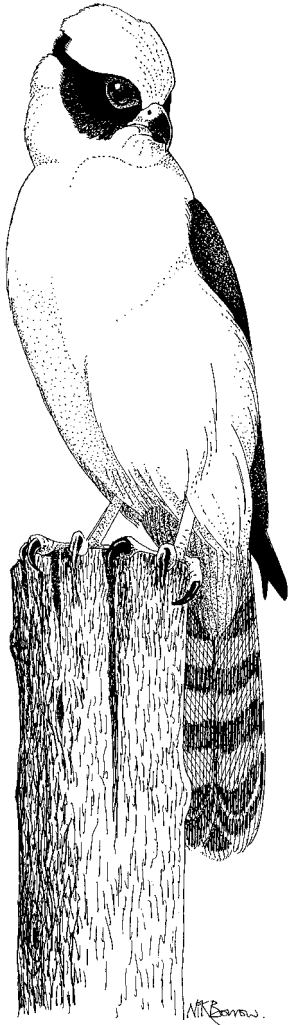
we may well find Torrent Ducks, marvelling at their ability to swim against even the strongest of currents, a White-capped Dipper bobbing on top of a boulder and the perky little Torrent Tyrannulet. The lower part of the valley has been much influenced by man. A mixture of second growth, coffee plantations with tall shade trees, cleared areas and both disturbed and primary forest provide a varied habitat for many forest and edge species. One of the highlights of our visit to Venezuela will undoubtedly be a visit to the famous Andean Cock-of-the-Rock lek which was found here a few decades ago, and still is one of just two known leks in the country. We will arrive before dawn, in time to listen for the piercing whistles of the Band-winged Nightjar, which should not be hard to locate with our spotlight, and next we will make our way through the forest until we reach a steep path which will lead us down to the edge of the lek. Here we will marvel at the antics of the gorgeous, glowing-orange males and the incredible sounds uttered during their displays, only occasionally interrupted by a furtive visit by the drably-cloaked females. Other birds found in these humid forests and in the Andean foothills lower down include Plumbeous Kite, Blue Ground-Dove, Blue-chinned

Sapphire, Lazuline Sabrewing, Steely-vented Hummingbird, Northern Violaceous Trogon, the near-endemic Pale-headed Jacamar, Red-headed Barbet, Many-banded Aracari, Yellow-billed Toucanet, Yellow-tufted Woodpecker, the strange Cliff Flycatcher (which often announces its presence with a twittering whistle as it circles swallow-like for insects), Stripe-backed Wren, Tennessee and Bay-breasted Warblers, Blue Dacnis, Guira and White-shouldered Tanagers, Highland Hepatic-Tanager, Orange-crowned Oriole and Yellow-bellied Siskin. With luck we will encounter the much-wanted, secretive Pavonine Cuckoo, the exquisite Western Striped Manakin or the attractive White-bearded Manakin, lekking males of which produce loud 'firecracker' sounds by snapping their wings.

Day 18 After a final morning in the Andean foothills we will drive out into the famous Llanos of Venezuela for a three nights stay at Hato El Cedral. The change in scenery is profound as we leave the Andes behind and first pass through dry woodland before emerging into the wide open, seasonally-flooded plains of the Llanos, punctuated only by patches of gallery woodland along the watercourses and clumps of *Mauritia* palms. After we pass through Barinas there will be so many waterbirds and raptors to observe as we travel across the seemingly endless wet savannas that stretch as far as the eye can see that it will be hard to control ourselves from stopping every few minutes, but we will just have to if we want to have dinner! During the drive we will look in particular for Pearl and Snail Kites, Laughing Falcon and Limpkin, species which are not usually met with at Hato El Cedral.

Days 19-20 The Llanos are a veritable birdwatcher's paradise – a vast, bird-rich

wetland to rival any in the world. At the ranch where we are staying an enlightened attitude has successfully combined conservation with cattle ranching – the principal economy of the region. Llaneros (plains cowboys) tend their herds on the lush savannas, watched from poolsides by basking caimans and hordes of Capybaras – the world's largest rodents. Other mammals are well represented and we may well encounter Common (or Southern) Opossum, Common Zorro (or Crab-eating Fox), Red Howler Monkey, White-tailed Deer and perhaps Giant Anteater. Spectacled Caimans lurk everywhere, huge Green Iguanas watch the scene as they sun themselves on exposed branches, and we could even encounter the amazing Green Anaconda, the largest snake in the New World. Bulldog Bats share the twilight with Band-tailed Nighthawks (and sometimes Nacunda Nighthawks), whilst a nocturnal excursion may turn up the vociferous Pauraque and perhaps a bizarre-looking Common Potoo or Great Potoo. Raptors are well represented, scanning for potential prey from tree tops and fence posts. King Vulture, White-tailed Kite, Crane, Savanna and White-tailed Hawks, Great Black-Hawk and Aplomado Falcon may all be seen. Herons, egrets, and ibises throng the marshes, dominated by the enormous Jabiru which stands two metres high. The spectacular Sunbittern inhabits the quieter channels, pools and glades of the Matiyure River's gallery forest. During our boat trips in this marvellous habitat we will also search for the shy Agami Heron, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, the prehistoric-looking Boat-billed Heron, the elusive Yellow-knobbed Curassow, huge Scarlet Macaws, Green-and-rufous and American Pygmy Kingfishers, Amazonian Black-Tyrant, and prehistoric-looking Hoatzins which sit and hiss



Laughing Falcon (Nik Borrow)

as one passes! Even the reclusive but delightful Zigzag Heron inhabits the narrow forest creeks, but we will be fortunate indeed if we manage to see this near-mythical bird! Another patch of gallery forest is accessible on foot and here we can come across a number of typical woodland birds such as Glittering-throated Emerald, Spot-breasted and Red-rumped Woodpeckers, Black-crested Antshrike, Pale-tipped Inezia, Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher, Rusty-backed Spinetail and Fuscous Flycatcher. Among taller trees we may well find a party of the spectacular Cream-coloured Woodpeckers, while at the water's edge we will keep an eye out for the elegant Grey-necked Wood-Rail. More isolated patches of woodland around our lodge and scattered through the ranch provide shelter to the aptly named Dwarf Cuckoo, Great Horned Owl, Lesser Nighthawk, Short-crested Flycatcher and the endemic White-bearded Flycatcher, while along shrubby edges of drainage channels we will look for the spritely River Tyrannulet and the

unobtrusive Riverside Tyrant. A 'safari-type' vehicle will be our mode of transportation when not out by boat, and during our rides through more open country we should come across many of the other species that inhabit this avian paradise, such as White-faced and Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, Orinoco Goose, Muscovy Duck, Brazilian Teal, Whistling Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Rufescent Tiger-Heron, the splendid Pinnated Bittern, Buff-necked, Sharp-tailed, Green, White and Glossy Ibises, Roseate Spoonbill, Wood and Maguari Storks, Crested Bobwhite, Azure Gallinule, Pied and Collared Plovers, Solitary Sandpiper, South American Snipe, Double-striped Thick-knee, Yellow-billed Tern, Black Skimmer, Plain-breasted Ground-Dove, Burrowing Owl, White-tailed Goldenthrout (sometimes absent from the area), Pale-breasted Spinetail, Grey Kingbird, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Brown-chested Martin, Yellowish Pipit, Masked Yellowthroat, Red-capped Cardinal, Grey and Ruddy-breasted Seed eaters,

Orange-fronted and Grassland Yellow-Finches, and Yellow-browed and Grassland Sparrows.

Day 21 Today we will return to Caracas where the extension ends this afternoon.

Accommodation & Road Transport: The hotels/lodges are of normal Birdquest standard throughout, although sometimes we have no choice but to use establishments at the simpler end of the scale where hot water supplies can be erratic. Road transport is by small coach and roads are variable in quality.

Walking: The walking effort is easy to moderate.

Climate: Generally warm or hot, dry and sunny at lower altitudes, but cool in upland areas (and even downright cold in the high Andes). Overcast weather is quite regular and there will be some rain at times. It will be fairly humid in the lowlands.

Bird Photography: Opportunities are worthwhile (good in the llanos).